

WHAT'S EATING OUR MAIL?



Lyle A. Dickey,

Lihue, Hawaii, U. S. A.

plus

MODERN FORGERIES

HISTORIC BADGES

CONSERVING THE PAST

AMERICA'S STAMP CLUB

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THE AMERICAN PHILATELIST

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'Topical Collectors and Dealers: Stay Alert



A Massive Number of Modern Stamp Forgeries Are Lurking in the Marketplace

BY JOHN LOWE



Figure 1. A genuine early stamp of France, Scott 21, at left, along with a fake of the stamp attributed to Jean de Sperati. (Fake courtesy of William Dixon, APS Circuit Sales; genuine courtesy of APS Reference Collection.)

Forgeries of stamps in many forms have plagued the stamp market since the 1860's when it was found that money could be made by fooling unknowing stamp collectors and dealers.

Fast forward 150 years and some things haven't changed. Over the past few years, I have discovered more than 100 forgery sets and souvenir sheets totaling thousands of faked stamps – mostly of issues from the 1980s – and I am certain that as the word gets out, more new forgeries will be discovered.

The curse of philatelic forgeries dates practically from

the hobby's beginning; the most famous are the Sperati and Fournier forgeries.

Jean de Sperati (1884-1957) was an Italian stamp collector who gained extensive knowledge of stamp production from relatives who owned a postcard factory and paper mill. Sperati, who in 1948 was convicted in a French court of “deceitful intentions,” counterfeited many extremely rare stamps that even experts could not recognize as being forgeries. To this day some of the forgeries Sperati made are likely still in collections and unknown to the owner that they are indeed forgeries [Figure 1]. His master-level forgeries are considered among the best in the world.

Francois Fournier (1846-1917) lived in Switzerland in 1903 and started a business making facsimile stamps to sell to collectors who could not afford the genuine rare stamps. These were popular at first, but then shady dealers and collectors began to sell them as genuine and Fournier's reputation became tarnished. He also ran a clinic where stamps were “restored,” with services such as re-gumming and cancel removal. Many of these forgeries and altered stamps are around and circulating on the philatelic market [Figure 2].

Forgeries of rare stamps continue today. One example of a highly-valued and sought-after modern stamp being



Figure 2. Two Dominican Republic stamps of 1879 with the same design. The stamp at left, Scott 35, is genuine; the stamp at right, Scott 34, is a fake attributed to Francois Fournier. (Fake courtesy of William Dixon, APS Circuit Sales; genuine courtesy of APS Reference Collection.)

forged is the 1980 Year of the Monkey Stamp from the People's Republic of China (Scott 1586). Although 5 million stamps were issued, the popularity and demand in the Asian stamp market has increased the stamp's price to surprising heights. The Scott catalog value is now around \$1,700 for a single mint stamp. In 2015, a sheet of 80 of these stamps sold for \$162,180 through Zurich Asia in Hong Kong. The 2019 *Scott Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue* clearly states: "excellent forgeries of No. 1586 exist."

You can see why a forger would be attracted to stamps like these. What has happened in recent years though, throws a new angle in the production of forgeries. Today, there are forgeries of modern, inexpensive topical stamp sets and souvenir sheets that are highly sought after by topical specialists, general collectors and even non-stamp collectors who just like what's on the stamp. Because of their relatively low value in the stamp market, these stamps have been massively reproduced by one or more forgers and have slipped by all of us for years, likely because nobody suspected that anyone would forge such stamps.

In early 2015, I was alerted to a suspicion that stamps and souvenir sheets printed by the former Format International Security Printers Ltd. were being reproduced and placed onto the market in the bulk quantities of full panes.



Figure 3. In the mid-1980s, countries such as Uganda contracted with Format Printers to print stamps. A set of four single stamps, plus a souvenir sheet, appeared in 1983 to mark the next year's Olympic Games, Scott 417.

"Format Printers," as many philatelists call the company for short, was incorporated in 1969 and had a short-lived existence. The company, which was on Parkhouse Street in London, went bankrupt in 1990. During its existence the company printed thousands of postage stamp issues for more than 100 countries, primarily British Commonwealth, African and Middle Eastern countries [Figure 3]. The British Crown Agents and Philatelists Ltd., both stamp agencies, were two

of its main customers. I have researched the company, its history and the stamps it produced.

I was alerted in the fall of 2015 that large lots of these forgeries were being moved through a large and respected European auction house along with another reputable auction house here in the United States. Several British stamp dealers and some collectors I have dealings with were already working with me on tracing the source of several forgeries I discovered earlier in the year appearing on eBay and other venues.

I went to the European auctioneer's website and looked at the current auction and saw that there were many lots being offered that clearly were forgeries. A couple of stamp dealers in the U.K. and I alerted the auction house about the forgeries. The auction house's representatives examined the lots and promptly withdrew all of them. Much to my disappointment, the auction company returned the forgeries to the consignor, who remains unknown to the public.

Many of the stamps that have been forged have relatively low catalog values. For example, four mint pairs of 1985 Michael Jackson stamps we're looking at in this article, (Scott 894 - 897), have a catalog value of \$6.70 [Figure 4]. You may ask why anyone would want to reproduce stamp sets of relatively low value.

To answer that, let's look at a set of stamps called the "Leaders of the World," which was produced and distributed in the 1980s [Figure 5]. The Leaders of the World series was designed and marketed by a stamp agency called Philatelists Ltd. and printed by Format Printers. The stamps produced from 1983 to 1987 were from a number of British Commonwealth countries: St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Tuvalu and dependencies, Nevis, St. Lucia, the British Virgin Islands and Montserrat.

The series celebrated events such as Queen Elizabeth's 60th birthday and the bicentennial of the birth of John J. Audubon. Topical series of cars and trains as well as butterflies, cats and dogs, flowers were also produced, as well as issues for the 1984 Olympics and fa-



Figure 4. The genuine St. Vincent Michael Jackson stamps of 1985, Scott 894 to 897.



Figure 5. Stamps from St. Lucia in the Leaders of the World series showed locomotives in 1983, Scott 626, and the Queen Mother in 1985, Scott 782-783. By 1986, the logo at the tops and bottoms of pairs had disappeared, as on some new locomotives stamps, Scott 818.

mous cricket players. Most of the early issues have the Leaders of the World logo on them, though the logo disappeared in 1986.

To many collectors of older issues, these stamps are considered “wallpaper,” meaning pretty stamps sold simply to make money. Those reaping the profits could be anyone, from the printer and distributor to the governmental entities who approved the stamps. The area is murky at best. And none of this even relates to secondary market sales, and definitely does not relate to the flood of forgeries being sold today.

The Tuvalu 1985 Leaders of the World Audubon Birds stamp issues are a good example [Figure 6]. Mainly collected by bird topical collectors and collectors of Tuvalu, the catalog value for the set is around \$2.50. Now, forgeries have been offered for the last three years as normal perforated stamps and imperforate stamps in bulk lots of five and 10 pairs in partial sheets through online venues for \$1 and consistently sell from \$1 to \$5. Some buyers then break them into individual stamp sets and resell them online for \$1 to \$2, undercutting sellers of the genuine sets.

The easiest way to recognize and suspect that the Tuvalu set is forged is to look at the 1-cent values. The color bar that contains the country name is dark purple whereas on the genuine stamps it is reddish pink. If you notice this it is time to look closer.

The value of legitimate sets of many of the Leaders of the

World issues run at relatively low prices, generally from less than \$1 to \$10; occasionally there’s a set with a higher value. Hypothetically, if someone reproduced any set cheaply in quantities of 5,000 to 100,000, you can see that the monetary take can rise quickly. If these reproduced stamps are sold at a “wholesale” rate to large volume dealers, who in turn sell them to smaller dealers at prices much less than catalog values, profits pour in. I have detected nearly 100 sets of these have been counterfeited.

The majority of the modern forgeries are easily recognizable once you know what to look for.

These new forgeries are designed to deceive dealers and collectors. The perforations and “look” of the reproductions are amazingly similar to the original and authentic stamps. This is because the printing process used to make the forgeries is similar to the processes used to make the original stamps. The original printing materials used to make the original plates, and in a few cases even the original plates themselves, were and are being used by the forger, making them exceptionally deceitful.

Without going into a lot of technical details about stamp production, in the majority of cases, I have discovered that you can verify authenticity of most stamps by examining the gum.

Most of the forgeries have smooth white gum. In some cases you can see the facing image on the stamp through it

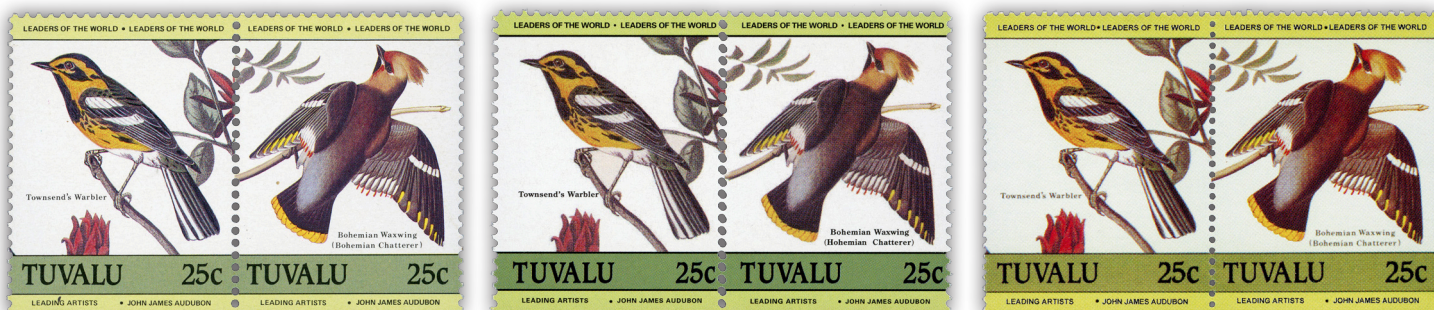


Figure 6. The Audubon stamps of Tuvalu are among those that were targeted by forgers. From left, the 25-cent pair Audubon Birds pair, Scott 280: the genuine, a forged pair and an unauthorized reprint.

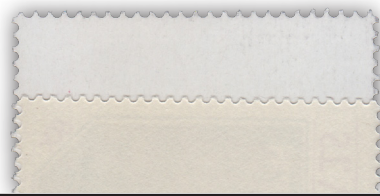


Figure 7. A comparison of stamp gums. At bottom is the original yellowish gum used by Format Printers; at top is the white gum found on forged stamps.

more clearly than on authentic stamps. I also have found that many have smooth, slightly yellowish colored gum. Both gum types were never used by the Format Printers because these gums did not exist at the time of production during the 1980s. Almost all stamps printed by the Format Printers were a much darker and heavier yellowish, textured gum type, which cannot be reproduced by a forger [Figure 7].

In the majority of cases, I have discovered that when you



Figure 8. Screens look different between a genuine (left), and a forged St. Vincent Michael Jackson stamp of 1985.

look at forgeries under high magnification, the screens used in the printing process are much coarser than on the genuine stamp issues [Figure 8]. Format Printers were among stamp printers during its time using a lithographic process that included using very fine 600-point screens, which made images on the stamps much more detailed and clearer than most lithograph printers produced at the time.

Because the forgeries use inferior, coarser screens in the reconstruction of printing plates, details are blurry, so much so that some details cannot be seen at all. A good description on the screens use in the process of offset lithography printing can be found at <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/symbiartic/dots-spots-and-pixels-whats-in-a-name>.

Forgeries have not only been produced to look like legitimate stamps, but have been produced as "imperforates," and in some cases, as "color proof sets" as well. Worse yet, many forgeries have been created to look like stamp errors, such as inverts, or are missing values or country names. Many of these have been sold for high dollar amounts and are offered in the range of \$25 to \$50 a set. The inverted Michael Jackson forgery set shown I purchased in 2016 from a London dealer on eBay for \$25.

Following are two examples that show the wide range of modern stamps that are forged. I feel there could be many more forgeries of stamps out there originally printed by Format International Security Printers.

The reason these forgeries exist seems obvious: the forg-

er has access to the original printing materials used by the printer to make the stamps. How much of this material is in their possession today is unknown. Records of destruction or retention of the materials do not exist.

The 1985 St. Vincent Michael Jackson Forgeries

An article published in the October 2015 issue of the *Philatelic Exporter* magazine describes these inverts and why it is impossible for them to be genuine.

The *Philatelic Exporter* is presently owned and produced by Stanley Gibbons in the United Kingdom. It is mainly read by members of the Philatelic Traders Society, as it is a traders-only subscription. The Philatelic Traders Society is the British counterpart of our American Stamp Dealers Association.

The *Philatelic Exporter* explains that because the original plates had the denomination (value) and the country name on the same plate, the country name would have to be inverted as well. This is not the case on the forgeries, as you can see [Figure 9].



Figure 9. A forged invert (above) of a 1985 St. Vincent Michael Jackson pair, Scott 897. It's an easily detected fake. The original issue is shown below.



If you look at the stamps side-by-side, the colors are obviously very different.

Also, the high value of the genuine issued Michael Jackson stamp set is \$5. All of the forged invert sets show the denomination as \$4. Normal and imperforate forgery sets contain the correct high value.

A withdrawn lot from a European auction house was massive and included many different issues. It included 1985 St. Vincent Michael Jackson and Elvis Presley sets as perfo-

rated normal issues, imperforate sets, imperforate invert sets and invert color proof sets. For quite some time I had seen only perforated versions on the market, not any of the imperforate inverts from that lot.

Things changed in February of this year. Inverted Michael Jackson and Elvis Presley imperforate color proof forgeries in full panes appeared on eBay being sold by a reputable dealer. Other forgeries were being offered as well. Working with eBay, we were able to stop the sales, but not before a few sets of the panes were sold. I purchased several sets myself for verification and reference before the sales were stopped.

A seller on eBay has been a prime source of forgeries. The seller began selling forgeries of the normal and imperforate Michael Jackson and Elvis Presley stamps in bulk lots of five and ten sets in the latter part of 2017. I think these were the same forgeries that I had convinced a European auctioneer to withdraw two years earlier. The sales likely mean that the consignor to that 2015 auction merely moved them onto the market through a different venue. This seller, who is based in the Baltics, continues to try to move more of the forgeries onto the market.

There is no absolute single source of forgeries. I have traced sources from many countries, including Latvia, Russia, Belgium, India, Israel, the United Kingdom and the United States, all of which have many legitimate dealers.

St. Vincent 1985 Michael Jackson and Elvis Presley Problem Issues

The St. Vincent 1985 Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson issues were reprinted in the early 1990s after Format Printers no longer existed [Figure 10]. They were never authorized by St. Vincent to be reprinted and are noted to exist in *Stanley Gibbons Windward Islands & Barbados Catalog* (3rd edition), which classifies them as “unauthorized reprints,” per St. Vincent Philatelic Services Inc. The description of them in the notes is vague, stating only that they are “poorly printed on whiter paper.”

When I learned about these stamps in 2010, I conducted extensive research. The perforated versions are easy to recognize because you can count the vertical perforations between the stamp pairs easily. The



Figure 10. Legitimate 1985 St. Vincent Elvis Presley stamps, above, and unauthorized reprints, right. Though the stamps appear to be the same, the difference is in the perforations.



genuine stamps have 24 holes whereas the unauthorized reprints have 27 holes. Imperforates, inverts and other oddities were created at that time as well, (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Elvis Presley stamps with inverted words. They're fake.

None of the Presley inverts were ever printed by Format Printers, but were from an unauthorized reprinting.

Sadly for both issues, I estimate that more than 75 percent of the stamps on the market are either unauthorized reprints or new modern forgeries.

According to my British sources, the unauthorized reprints of these were produced in the mid-1990s under direction of Clive Feigenbaum (1939-2007), who had a rocky philatelic career. At one point he was chairman of Stanley Gibbons and was involved with a complex civil suit in which Tuvalu accused him of purposely printing error stamps. He was the final owner of the Format printing company from 1987 to 1989, before it was liquidated.

St. Vincent forgeries first appearing in 2014 have an uncanny similarity to these unauthorized reprints, the main difference being that the perforated forgeries have the correct perforation size.

I discovered that 11 other sets were reprinted without authoriza-

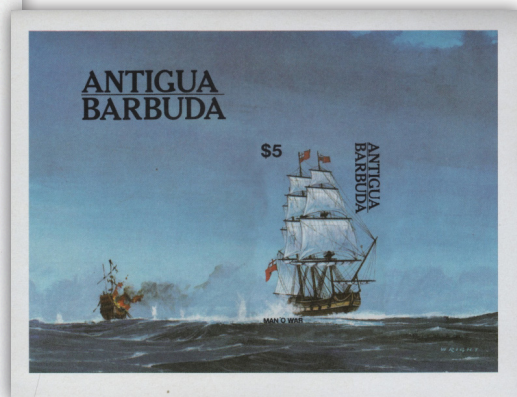


Figure 12. The real perforate, at left, and simulated imperforate error, above, of the \$5 Man of War souvenir sheet of 1984 from Antigua and Barbuda, Scott 749.

tion and have never been noted in any catalog. All have the same characteristics and evidence shows they have been reprinted multiple times.

Imperforate Man of War Souvenir Sheet Forgery

Let's take a look at the genuine and fake \$5 Man of War souvenir sheet of 1984 from Antigua and Barbuda [Figure 12].

The most obvious way to tell this is a forgery is because it is a machine-cut imperforate. No imperforate varieties of this souvenir sheet were ever on the market until these forgeries appeared. Possible imperforate proofs were sold in complete press sheets in the final sale of the Format Printers archive. No machine-cut imperforate varieties have ever been documented to exist. These forgeries have been sold many times now in bulk lots on eBay in lots of five and 10 souvenir sheets without anyone even suspecting they are forgeries.

Antigua and Barbuda had nothing to do with Leaders of the World stamps, yet this souvenir sheet is now affected. I use this example to show collectors and dealers that prefer to shun modern stamp issues from the countries involved with the Leaders of the World series that countries that were never involved in the series also are the victims of fake stamps.

The forgeries have the same poor quality imagery as described before, but with this souvenir sheet the gum looks

similar to genuine gum unless compared side-by-side with an original. The forgery gum is already curling badly, though, which is one way to suspect something is wrong. It is smooth and not textured like the gum on the other forgeries.

Also, if you look closely, you can see that the forgery has much darker water and the upper portion of the cloudy sky is a murky grayish blue. You can still see that it is an excellent forgery that can easily slip by collectors and dealers who do not know these fakes exist.

My discoveries have revealed that many stamp issues – mostly from the 1980s – for St. Vincent and dependencies, St. Lucia, Montserrat, British Virgin Islands and Nevis, have been forged. Only a few issues for Tuvalu and its dependencies have been forged and only a few issues for Nauru, Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Lesotho and Tanzania have been forged.

Because Format Printers printed stamps for more than 100 countries, there are likely more forgeries that will be discovered. Stanley Gibbons specialized catalogs note specific printers for stamps.

Many sets printed by Format Printers are highly collected and sought after, such as Guyana's Reichenbachia Orchid series [Figure 13]. The listings for these stamps in the 2019 *Scott Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue* shows 315 listings, from

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Figure 13. A stamp from Guyana's Reichenbachia Orchid series from years 1985 to 1987, Guyana Scott 1077. The author fears that forgeries of these stamps may be in the marketplace.

Scott 1021 to 1336. The cost to obtain all of the issues is now very high. It is possible that forgeries of some of these may exist.

I have documented many of the issues I have discovered on my reference website. You can get to the introduction page at www.golowesstamps.com/reference/formatprinters/Modern%20Fake%20Stamps/modern_fake_stamps.htm. All verifiable information on other forgeries of stamps printed by the Format Printers is welcomed.

Are stamps printed by other British stamp printing companies being forged in the same way? Recently, another specialist alerted me to the fact that the Caicos Islands 1984 Disney Christmas souvenir sheet (Scott 549) has been forged. The differences and style are the same, but it was printed by The House of Questa. Is there a connection?

Until the existence of these forgeries and unauthorized reprints are noted in the major catalogs, many thousands of stamp collectors and dealers worldwide will continue to be fooled by these imposters.

Please stay alert about forgeries and if you suspect anything, please share your concerns with myself, other collectors, reputable dealers, catalog publishers and auction houses. I can be contacted through my website.

THE AUTHOR

A member of the APS since 2007, John Lowe is a professional commercial painter by trade. Owner and operator of Golowe's Collector Stamps, he has been a collector, licensed dealer and research specialist since the mid 1980s. His website has been developed to publish his research on the former Format International Security Printers and the stamps they produced. It is also developed to help all collectors and dealers in stamps to detect forgeries of stamps produced by the above-mentioned company and to help in the fight against illegal stamps. John is a specialist in Egyptian philately and is a member of the Egypt Study Circle.

The American Philatelist is a great resource for collectors of all experience levels. When you are finished with this copy of the journal, please consider donating it to your local library or leaving it in a waiting room. It is another way to share the hobby!

Auction Announcement November 2018

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